

**“At home too everything is falling apart”:**

**Waste, domestic disorder and gender in Alison Lurie’s early fiction**

In the opening pages of Alison Lurie’s *The War Between the Tates* (1974), a novel set in 1969, housewife Erica Tate is interrupted in her discovery of her husband Brian’s infidelity by a “peculiar burning odour in the room, like explosives.”<sup>1</sup> Looking up from a letter to him from his lover Wendy, Erica “opens the oven door: at once the kitchen fills with smoke and the hot, sweet, ashy smell of scorched cookies. The war has begun” (*TWBTT* 22). The interlacing of infidelity, charred baked goods, and war imagery in this scene is paradigmatic of Lurie’s 1960s and early 1970s fiction, which similarly deploys domestic mess to—largely retrospectively—explore the socio-political tensions of the period in ways that dramatically differ from those manifest in the work of writing by her male contemporaries, and, indeed, from waste literature as a whole. Lurie’s first novel, *Love and Friendship* (1962), considers the gender and class dimensions of the codification of waste and dirt in small town America; in her second, *The Nowhere City* (1965), waste and disarray serve to undermine visions of a utopian Los Angeles while simultaneously suggesting the city’s emancipatory potential for women. In the scene just mentioned, Erica’s burned cookies mark one of many disruptions that underwrite the unravelling of the Tates’ marriage and the convulsive effects of a burgeoning women’s rights movement, campus activism against establishment values, environmentalism, and anti-war sentiment. Taken together, these three novels provide a startlingly vivid account of the 1950s and 1960s as perceived by white, middle class America through a sustained exploration of remnants, dirt, and what we I call “trash gone rogue” or “feminist waste”—that is, effluvia whose very presence disrupts the gender divisions of the domestic spaces from which it has been excised by sully, interrupting or challenging traditional gender roles.

Whether because it does not fit easily into traditional classifications of “modernist” or “postmodernist,” or due to perceptions of being “middlebrow,” Lurie’s work itself has remained largely overlooked by American studies scholars, generating only two in-depth studies.<sup>2</sup> This is despite her incisive representation of shifting gender politics, and canny attention to the signifying potential of literary objects. Lurie is palpable in her absence from literary criticism concerned with the socio-political aspects of what Bill Brown terms the “object matter” of fiction, and from studies of waste literature to date including my own, which remain largely focused on male authors, and which almost entirely ignore the gendered

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<sup>1</sup> Alison Lurie, *The War Between the Tates* (London: Abacus, 1989 [1974]), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Hauer Costa, *Alison Lurie* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992) and Judie Newman, *Alison Lurie: A Critical Study* (Amsterdam and Rodopi: 2000).

aspect of social constructions of waste.<sup>3</sup> Such absence is especially peculiar given that waste matter proliferates across Lurie's *oeuvre*, repeatedly disrupting the narratives in which her characters are entangled. This paper is a first effort to rectify this absence, in the hope of opening up a broader discussion around materiality, worth, and gender across Lurie's *oeuvre* as a whole. In what follows, I focus on the three texts mentioned above, *Love and Friendship*, *The Nowhere City*, and *The War Between the Tates*.<sup>4</sup> Compelling contestations of heteronormativity in their own right—as could, indeed, be said of Lurie's waste writings as a whole—these waste depictions stand out all the more in their difference from those of male writers of the period. As I have noted elsewhere, much countercultural writing between the mid-1950s and the 70s followed Surrealism, Dada and the neo-avant-garde in foregrounding consumer effluvia to either critique mass consumption, or to more faithfully represent modern life.<sup>5</sup> Lurie's work departs from these efforts (by largely male writers) in its conceptualisation of waste *not* as a by-product of unchecked consumption or a symbol of post-war affluence but rather as both an embodiment of patriarchy and a means to dismantle it. The waste matter in these novels effectively provides another alternative to the alternative history of the 1950s and 1960s charted by the likes of William Burroughs, Donald Barthelme, and (outside of the US), Georges Perec, Samuel Beckett, and Italo Calvino.<sup>6</sup> In this story, waste provides a counter not to capitalist hegemony but rather to male hegemony. In focusing on the feminist dimension of the effluvia in these texts, I aim to complicate existing scholarship on literary waste. Building on Newman's assessment of Lurie's novels as "comedies of the sign,"<sup>7</sup> I argue that waste and dirt in these texts are the most prominent signs of all.

## 1. Defining Lurien waste

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<sup>3</sup> Female writers do feature in waste scholarship, but they are generally given far less prominence than their male counterparts. The following studies feature roughly one woman for every five to ten men: Will Viney, *Waste: A Philosophy of Things* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), which includes Rosamond Lehmann; Christopher Smith, *The Poetics of Waste* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), which includes Gertrude Stein; and my book, *Consumerism, Waste, and Re-use in Twentieth-century Fiction* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), which only studies Mina Loy in depth. Women writers entirely absent from John Scanlan's *On Garbage* (New York: Reaktion Books, 2005) and Sarah K. Harrison's *Waste Matters: Urban Margins in Contemporary Literature* (London: Routledge, 2015). An exception to this male-centric trend is Morrison's *The Literature of Waste: Material Ecopoetics and Ethical Matter* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), in which female writers feature as prominently as men, and her earlier study, *Excrement in the Late Middle Ages: Sacred Filth and Chaucer's Fecopoetics* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), which features an entire chapter on 'gendered filth' (45-56).

<sup>4</sup> While I make reference to these novels, I have chosen to largely omit *Imaginary Friends* (1967) and *Real People* (1969) from this analysis due to the far less prominent role that waste plays in these texts, where it serves, to my mind, rather different purposes to the ones examined here. A study of waste in *Imaginary Friends* might, perhaps, probe the relationship between feminism and madness—but it is beyond the scope of this article to do so.

<sup>5</sup> Dini, *Consumerism, Waste, and Re-use ...*, 68, 101.

<sup>6</sup> I am thinking in particular of Perec's *Things: A Story of the Sixties* (1965), and Barthelme and Beckett's prose across the 1950s and 60s, which I discuss in *Consumerism, Waste and Re-Use*, 67-98 and 102-112. For an incisive discussion of waste in Burroughs, see David Alworth, *Site Reading: Fiction, Art, Social Form* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 51-72.

<sup>7</sup> Newman, *Alison Lurie*, 7.

At the most basic level, trash in Lurie's fiction is a realist device: its proliferation in the novels under discussion reflects the actual proliferation of consumer waste in mid-century America.<sup>8</sup> Sorting paper and cardboard from food remnants, or taking out the trash, are examples of mundane tasks whose function, within the economy of the novel, is to situate the characters more securely within their middle class context<sup>9</sup> and to reinforce gender roles (in this case, that taking out the trash is a "man's job"<sup>10</sup>). But the characters' discussions of cleanliness and classifications of waste also serve to register a whole set of anxieties and tensions at the heart of 1950s and 1960s white middle-class experience—anxieties, as mentioned above, very different to those explored by male visual artists and writers during this decade.

To a certain extent, waste in these texts epitomizes Mary Douglas's notion of dirt as "matter out of place"—that which threatens us with its fundamental "otherness," and which we seek to excise in an effort to maintain (the illusion of) control.<sup>11</sup> Douglas's definition, which she acknowledged was partly inspired by disagreements with her husband regarding domestic hygiene and the "relativity of dirt" (iix), is ideally suited to the texts at hand, where waste matter represents both the sully of the nuclear family, and a means to disrupt a patriarchal hegemonic order. I combine Douglas's definition however with a temporal conceptualisation developed elsewhere, in which waste and dirt are "matter out of time,"<sup>12</sup> and which, I argue, helps highlight the economic subtext of some of the texts' gendering of these substances. As numerous scholars have established, the vilification of dirt at the beginning of the twentieth century was inextricably linked to the growth of the commercial cleaning products industry, which also promoted around-the-clock cleaning, rendering housework potentially interminable.<sup>13</sup> Dirt thus has a gendered, temporal, dimension, both marking time and *taking up* time: the experienced housewife knows how long remains until she must clean the same spot again, while entire days are consumed in keeping at bay that which will inevitably return. In both instances, and in contrast to what advertisers promised housewives of Lurie's generation, the effort is ultimately futile—as famously stated by

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<sup>8</sup> Heather Rogers notes: "by 1960, each American tossed out about two and a half pounds of trash daily," helped by an advertising model that emphasized expendability (*Gone Tomorrow: The Hidden Life of Garbage* (New York and London: The New Press, 2005), 105).

<sup>9</sup> Christopher J. Barrow provides a useful summary of studies showing US environmentalism's predominance in the 1960s and 70s among the white middle classes (*Developing the Environment: Problems and Management* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 11).

<sup>10</sup> "Cleaning the dishes, making the beds and laying the table are girls' work; emptying rubbish, gleaning ash-trays and emptying waste baskets are for boys," notes Ann Oakley in *Sex, Gender and Society* (London: Ashgate, 2016 [1972]), 127.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, 2007 [1966]), 202.

<sup>12</sup> Dini, *Consumerism, Waste, and Re-use...*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Rosie Cox, "Dishing the Dirt: Dirt in the Home" in *Dirt: The Filthy Reality of Everyday Life*, Rosie Cox et al. (London: Profile Books, 2011), 37-74. See also Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*: “The battle against dust and dirt is never won.”<sup>14</sup> Lurie’s texts likewise make clear that housework and social propriety occupy time and energy that could otherwise be dedicated to more creative pursuits: where writing, as novelist and housewife Janet Smith notes in Lurie’s *Real People* (1969), produces a “story, which can be finished,” being a wife and mother and doing “The Right Thing,” as she puts it, “has to be done over and over again every day, like any housework.”<sup>15</sup> Both definitions—“matter out of time” and “matter out of place”—are integral to the feminist readings that follow.

## 2. “The world [...] is a disorderly, dirty scrap heap”:<sup>16</sup> Dirt and disorder in *Love and Friendship*

*Love and Friendship* renders explicit the relationship between domestic dirt’s codification and notions of marital harmony, gender and class from the very first scene. The novel’s opening line—“The day Emily Stockwell Turner fell out of love with her husband began much like other days” (*LF* 3)—is followed by *eight pages* about house cleaning, during which Emmy (as she is known to her friends) tidies the kitchen and seeks to evade her new cleaning lady’s endless chatter. While a wonderfully comedic opening in its own right, the deadpan statement and detailed account of the housewife’s mundane activity are in fact characteristic of the novel’s broader concerns.

*Love and Friendship* is set in the fictitious all-male liberal arts university town of Convers, loosely based on Amherst, where Lurie’s husband taught from 1954 to 1957, and draws upon Lurie’s experiences during that period.<sup>17</sup> The novel traces the entwined stories of Emmy, her friend Miranda Fenn, their husbands Holman Turner and Julian Fenn (both recently-appointed lecturers in the Convers English department), and Emmy’s eventual lover, failed musician Will Thomas. Reflecting the gender roles of the period, both women are housewives who, though assisted by a weekly cleaner, spend most of their time on housework.<sup>18</sup> Taking its title from an early novella by Jane Austen, Lurie’s novel also pays tribute to Austen in playfully undermining the values of its middle- and aspiring-middle class characters and parodying their efforts to eradicate (literal and metaphorical) dirt.

The following description of Emmy’s perception of mess exemplifies this focus:

In the kitchen the dishes still stood in the sink and various objects lay about on the floor: paper napkins, plastic parts of toys [...] They were all relatively

<sup>14</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, transl. H. M. Parshley (London: Vintage, 1977 [1949]), 271.

<sup>15</sup> Alison Lurie, *Real People* (London: Abacus, 1987 [1969]), 134.

<sup>16</sup> Alison Lurie, *Love and Friendship* (London: Abacus, 1987 [1962]). Hereafter references to this novel will be in the form of parentheses in the text and using the abbreviation *LF* followed by the page number.

<sup>17</sup> Newman, *Alison Lurie*, 24.

<sup>18</sup> Both Oakley and Schwartz Cowan cite surveys showing that between 80 and 85% of adult women throughout the 1950s and 1960s were housewives, and that women spent an average of 60 to 80 hours a week on housework (Oakley, *Housewife*, 6-7; Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother...*, 159).

clean and had only been on the floor for an hour or so, but the sight of them filled Emmy with irritation. Brought up in a house where someone always came around to pick up anything that fell, she could not get used to domestic disorder (*LF* 5).

Here Lurie elegantly interlaces the material realities of a “generic” kind of mess with which any housewife will be familiar with that generic mess’s personal significance for *this* housewife: an affront to her aesthetic sensibilities, and something entirely foreign to her class. In contrast to the phenomenological conceptualisation of housework famously espoused by Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* (1958)—“through daily polishing,” the housewife “awakens furniture that was asleep”<sup>19</sup>—Emmy sees demeaning work for which her wealthy upbringing has not prepared her—and which, as Ruth Schwartz Cowan notes in her history of housework and domestic technology, a previous generation of faculty wives would not have had to do.<sup>20</sup>

Crucially, the scene foreshadows the literal and metaphorical disorder to come, which is embodied in the figure of her cleaner, Mrs Rabbage, in many respects a caricature of the meddling housekeeper. Her very name is significant in this regard, as it appears to be a cross between “rabid” and “cabbage”—the latter of which was used as an insult by housewives interviewed, in the 1960s, by the feminist anthropologist Ann Oakley (and was also famously used as a descriptor of the unnamed housewife in Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” first published in 1953<sup>21</sup>). The women in Oakley’s study repeatedly used “cabbage” to designate “someone entirely immersed in domestic affairs [...] a drab, uninteresting automaton.”<sup>22</sup> The term became mainstream in New Zealand and in feminist circles more broadly in 1968, after the feminist magazine *Thursday* featured a cover story on depression among suburban “cabbage patch wives,” provocatively titled “Who says I’m a cabbage?”<sup>23</sup> In both cases, the term would have stemmed from the story told to children that babies are born from cabbage patches—rendering a cabbage-patch wife a woman whose sole purpose is to procreate and tend her family. While Lurie’s novel was published nearly a decade prior to Oakley’s study and six years before the magazine feature, the striking parallels at the level of language enrich the reader’s sense of Mrs Rabbage as a “rabid cabbage”—a sharply

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<sup>19</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, transl. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994 [1958]), 69; 67.

<sup>20</sup> Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother*, 197.

<sup>21</sup> Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man is Hard to Find” (London: Faber and Faber, 1953), in *The Complete Short Stories* (1971), 117-133. Citation on 117.

<sup>22</sup> Writing in 2005, Oakley noted that the word cabbage was mentioned by 12 of the 40 women she surveyed. Ann Oakley, ed. *The Ann Oakley Reader: Gender, Women and Social Science* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2005), 67. Two of these references can be found in the transcripts published in *Housewife* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985 [1974]), 154; 139.

<sup>23</sup> Bernadette Noble, “Who Says I’m a Cabbage?” reprinted in *The Vote, the Pill and the Demon Drink: A History of Feminist Writing in New Zealand, 1893-1993*, ed. Charlotte Macdonald (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 1993), 155-158.

opinionated woman who ignores social codes and takes up far more narrative space than one might expect someone of her status to occupy. The following monologue is characteristic:

Where do you keep your cleaning rags? [...] Well I guess I can make out with that for today if I have to. Move to a new place you throw away a lot of things and afterwards you wish you hadn't. My sister moved up to North Greensbury last year threw away all the medicines the doctor gave her husband for his piles and the next thing you know the next year her oldest boy caught them the one that just got out of the Service. Well he was dead, that's why she threw them out. Her husband I mean (*LF* 8).

Aside from revealing Mrs Rabbage's strong opinions on waste (in this case, the perils of disposing of things that might come in useful later), the monologue is emblematic of her unstoppable logorrhoea. Mrs Rabbage may empty the domestic spaces through which she moves of physical dirt, but she leaves in her wake a trail of *figurative* dirt: words more or less embarrassing (such as the reference to anal infirmity) and muddled to the point of making little sense. The comedic element of this and of the later passages in which she appears stems from the contrast between the cleaner's "rabid" speech and the rigidity of the social mores to which her employers—and the wider community of Convers—subscribe.

The threat posed by Mrs Rabbage's verbal diarrhoea is compounded by the fact that, though her employers perceive her to be "other," they must allow her access to the most intimate spaces of their homes. The tensions resulting from this are most apparent in Mrs Rabbage's repeated objectification and conflation with her cleaning implements. Thus one faculty wife explains to Emmy and Miranda that she has replaced Mrs Rabbage with "one of those new vacuums with all the attachments. It's really a more sensible solution" (*LF* 149)—for a vacuum cleaner cannot poke around where it shouldn't.<sup>24</sup> This figuration is repeated later, when Mrs Rabbage enters Holman and Emmy's bedroom to clean while he is lying sick in bed: "[g]iving up all pretence at dusting," she "lean[s] against the dresser, rigidly, as a broom does" before intimating to Holman that "some people" (Will Thomas) "keep dropping in" at the house while he is at work (*LF* 203). The scene ends with Mrs Rabbage "[g]athering up the cleaning things" and leaving the room, "pulling the vacuum behind her. Its electric cord, like a long black tail, was the last to leave" (*LF* 203). Just as the vacuum cleaner confronts the cleaner or housewife with the dirt and dust sullyng their home, here the vacuum cleaner-woman confronts Holman with the metaphorical dirt sullyng his marriage in a

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<sup>24</sup> Statistics from this period indicate this to have been a prevalent trend. 80% of wealthy US households owned a vacuum cleaner in 1926; by 1941, this had extended to 47% of all households (Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother...*, 173; 94).

manner that reflects the longstanding association of sexual behaviour deemed unacceptable with filth.<sup>25</sup>

This attention to the codification of dirt is indebted in no small part to Austen, whose influence Lurie herself has acknowledged in interview<sup>26</sup> and whose own work, as several scholars have established, makes reference to dirt, cleaning and disorder to subtly discuss issues pertaining to sexuality, the body, and class.<sup>27</sup> Of particular note is Darryl Jones's identification of the fact that the scene in *Northanger Abbey* in which Catherine and Isabella meet "in defiance of wet and dirt" to read novels together immediately follows the text's famous defense of the novel form.<sup>28</sup> Lurie follows Austen's cue not only in connecting the following or flouting of such codes to one's acceptance or rejection of the status quo (for example, in a scene in which Emmy appears at a concert in front of all of the town covered in mud from the wasteland where she and her lover have been going to make love), but in recognizing that dirt is, in fact, where the interesting "stuff" of life lies. Lurie, like Austen, intimates that the task of the novelist—and the novel form—is to give space to that which, in real life, we are socialized to sweep away, be this physical dirt or metaphorical dirt (smut). In this case, attending to dirt provides a means to question established social codes and rigid categories, as well as to allegorize the initial stirrings of their dissolution, embodied in Emmy's trajectory from cleaning up mess and feeling disgust at the thought of domestic disorder, to dwelling in it freely. This same idea is made explicit in one of the few discussions of domestic mess to feature in *Real People* (1969), where novelist Janet Smith ultimately recognizes that she has been treating her short stories like her home—spaces to be sanitized and kept free of all incongruities and blemishes.<sup>29</sup> Janet's otherwise disappointing affair with a junk artist who views waste as more interesting than new goods at least teaches her to look at dirt and debris as more "real" and "relevant"—like the mud and broken glass in the artist's junk assemblages, inconvenient or ugly emotions lend expressiveness to narrative (*RP* 146). To write well, and to challenge convention, one must "use everything" (*RP* 146).

*Love and Friendship's* use of waste and disorder to challenge established categories is further manifest in a series of letter fragments (another tribute to Austen's epistolary novella) to a certain Francis Noye from his lover Allen Ingram, a visiting lecturer who is otherwise only mentioned in passing. In one of his final letters, Allen notes:

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<sup>25</sup> Morrison notes that this association dates back to at least the Middle Ages: Chaucer inveighs against adultery, equating it with filth, in *Canterbury Tales* X.848, 850 (86). The use of "dirty" in relation to jokes dates back to 1599, while the term "dirty word" in denote "smuttiness" or obscenity first gained entry into the *OED* in 1842 (188).

<sup>26</sup> Newman, *Alison Lurie*, 4.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Douglas Murray, "Donwell Abbey and Box Hill: Purity and Danger in Jane Austen's *Emma*," *Review of English Studies* 66.277 (2015): 954-970. <https://doi.org/10.1093/res/hgv046>. 16 March 2017 and Darryl Jones, *Jane Austen* (London and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 39-61.

<sup>28</sup> Jones, *Jane Austen*, 57.

<sup>29</sup> Lurie, *Real People* (London: Abacus, 1987 [1969]), 146. Hereafter references to this novel will be in the form of parentheses in the text and using the abbreviation *RP* followed by the page number.

The world [...] is a disorderly, dirty scrap heap. Convers, on the other hand, is a botanical or zoological garden, where each flower has its cage, each beast or bird its metal identification tag. When I first turned up everyone was frightened and nervous of me, but now that I have my label and show signs of staying quietly put, I am just one of the exhibits (*LF* 160).

At surface level, this is an eloquent description of the rigid codes that shape and define the everyday life of small liberal arts college communities, particularly in the twilight of the Eisenhower years (while *Love and Friendship* was published in 1962, Lurie wrote it during the last years of Eisenhower's second term). The world may be a chaotic scrapheap, but in this town everything is in its place—to the point of appearing artificial, or at the very least carefully engineered. The subtext however seems to be a more pointed critique of the things—people—that *don't* have a place here. Just as Ingram's homosexuality is never stated outright but merely implied, the discussion of fixed social roles and categories here seems to belie a more pointed critique of normativity in general, and heteronormativity in particular. This account of assimilation is in fact an indictment of small town life's equating of otherness with disorder. That the threat Ingram poses is precisely his "queerness" is implicit in the language of cages, tags and labels, all of which are intended to contain and neutralize difference, an impression heightened by his own marginal position within the novel.

Lurie makes the link between waste, dissent and queerness most explicit in a campus controversy in which Holman becomes embroiled towards the novel's end, and which anticipates the more explicitly political themes of her later novels. This controversy involves the construction of a new Religion Building, which the students oppose due to its "Traditional Colonial Split-Level Ranch-Style" (*LF* 232). To highlight their disgust at the building plans, the students give the building the nickname "Howard Johnson's," after the American chain of turnpike restaurants and motor lodges best known for its Colonial style architecture, which was seen as synonymous with social conformity.<sup>30</sup> They then fill the excavation site with "the debris of a school year" (*LF* 253). Allen's emphasis on the juvenile nature of the protesters' garbage heightens the brutality of Holman's reaction to the protesters' actions: for Allen witnesses him push a torch-wielding protester—a homosexual student called Dicky Smith—into the excavation, lighting the whole pit on fire. While Allen sees Holman's involvement as accidental, the reader is privy to its darker subtext: only a few pages prior to the riot, Holman has been reflecting:

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<sup>30</sup> Jim Hinckley and Jon G. Robinson, "Bob's Big Boy and Howard Johnson: The Beginning of the Generic Age" in *The Big Book of Car Culture: The Armchair Guide to Automotive Americana* (St. Paul, MN: Motorbooks, 2005), 24-25.



Wherever he looked now he saw fraud, falsehood, sloth, and corruption. Federal, state and natural laws were perverted: students plagiarizing their term papers, shortchanging in the stores, cars running red lights, bad strawberries at the bottom of the box, homosexuality, tax evasion, and adultery (*LF* 247).

Holman's pushing of the student into a pile of rubbish is no accident, then, but rather a powerful—if ultimately ineffectual, since the boy survives—effort to literally “throw out” the “other” and preserve the status quo, imitation Colonial architecture and all. What Allen sees as a humorous diversion from the homogeneity of small college town life, featuring boys being (again, literally) burned for “playing” at protest and a hapless and myopic academic powerless in the face of change, has a darker subtext: Holman's intervention renders disturbingly palpable the lengths to which those resistant to change will go to keep it at bay.

While *Love and Friendship* is less overtly political than Lurie's later texts, its representations of domestic dirt, waste and incipient campus unrest as perceived by a cloistered academic community in the mid-1950s subtly anticipate the later convulsions of the 1960s. The text proposes an embryonic form of radically disruptive feminist and queer waste here that is developed more fully in *The Nowhere City* and *The War Between the Tates*.

### 3. “Always in Flux, Growing, Sifting”: *The Nowhere City*

Lurie's second novel, *The Nowhere City*, deploys industrial waste and razed spaces to explore gendered anxieties around historical progress, capitalist acceleration, and temporality more broadly.<sup>31</sup> Published in 1965, the text was likely influenced by the four years Lurie spent in California between 1957 and 1961.<sup>32</sup> Paul Cattleman, a PhD student in history at an East Coast university and his wife Katherine move to Mar Vista, in west LA, after Paul has been hired to write the history of a large electronics company, Nutting Research and Development Corporation (NRDC)—an institution whose obscure involvement in weapons manufacture places it within a burgeoning military-industrial complex.<sup>33</sup> While Paul immediately falls in love with his new surroundings, Katherine's original reaction to the city is intensely negative. Not just the “nowhere city” suggested in the title (a play on the direct translation of “utopia”), LA for Katherine is also a “nothing city,” insofar as its entire economy is based on the circulation of meaningless goods and empty symbols:

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<sup>31</sup> Alison Lurie, *The Nowhere City* (London: Abacus, 1988 [1965]). Hereafter references to this novel will be in the form of parentheses in the text and using the abbreviation *NC* followed by the page number.

<sup>32</sup> Newman, *Alison Lurie*, 24.

<sup>33</sup> In her delineation of the development of LA's aircraft and related industries, Markusen dates the birth of the military-industrial complex to the mid-1950s, with the beginning of the Cold War. See “Aerospace Capital of the World: Los Angeles Takes Off” in Ann Markusen, Peter Hall, Sabina Dietrich, and Scott Campbell, *The Rise of the Gunbelt: The Military Remapping of Industrial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 82-117. Citation on 95.

Everything's advertisements here [...] the name of everything, you see, it's always a lie, like an advertisement. For instance, this Mar Vista, which is supposed to be Spanish for 'view of the sea'. That's because it has [...] no view of anything. [...] 'Spoil-the-View', I call it [...] You know what I saw the first day I got to Los Angeles? [...] a doughnut stand, and on top of it was this huge cement doughnut [...] that big empty hole going around and around up in the air, with some name painted on it. Well I thought, that's what this city is! That's what it is, a great big advertisement for *nothing* (NC 39).

This perception of LA as an assemblage of meaningless signs and vacuous promises papering over civilization's remnants is not itself unique—rather, it echoes a long tradition in “anti-LA” writing that dates back to the 1920s,<sup>34</sup> including Morrow Mayo's seminal book, *Los Angeles* (1933), in which Mayo described LA as “a commodity [...] like automobiles, cigarettes and mouth wash.”<sup>35</sup> Lurie self-consciously echoes this tradition through numerous references to Nathanael West's waste-laden indictment of Hollywood, *The Day of the Locust* (1939), but also through myriad allusions to *The Waste Land* (1922)—arguably the twentieth century's most ambitious effort to retrieve the remnants of civilization from the jaws of a relentless capitalist modernity, and which influenced West's own work.<sup>36</sup> The form of the novel itself mimics the city's collagistic architectural style. Most notably, each of the text's four parts, themselves named after specific neighbourhoods of Los Angeles, features a series of epigraphs: fragments of classified advertisements and headlines from *The Los Angeles Times*, including an ad for “Madame Anni, psychic reader” (NC 120). that echoes Eliot's “Madame Sosostriis, famous clairvoyant.”<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, descriptions of Beatniks driving around in hot rods—cars “of the early 1930s that had been more or less radically altered [and] freshly painted in all the colours of the TV screen” (NC 85)—render the setting itself a *mélange* of temporalities.<sup>38</sup>

What renders *The Nowhere City* noteworthy, however, is that Lurie makes this geophysical embodiment of the society of the spectacle the site, too, of Katherine's

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<sup>34</sup> Mike Davis, *City of Quartz* (London: Verso, 2009 [1990]), 18.

<sup>35</sup> Morrow Mayo, *Los Angeles* (Los Angeles, CA: A.A. Knopf, 1933), 319.

<sup>36</sup> Nancy Bombaci sees traces of Eliot in *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*: “Nathanael West's Aspiring Freaks” in *Freaks in Late Modernist American Culture: Nathanael West, Djuna Barnes, Tod Browning and Carson McCullers* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 33.

<sup>37</sup> T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (1922) in *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (London: Harcourt, 2014 [1930]), 27-54 (42.30).

<sup>38</sup> David N. Lucsko notes that both hot rod culture and its by-product, street rodding (a response to the commercial co-opting of hot rodding by the major automobile corporations), were “obsessed with the past” and viewed their salvaging projects as a form of art. See “Junkyard Jamboree: Hunting for Treasure in the Automotive Past, 1950-2010,” in *Junkyards, Gearheads, and Rust: Salvaging the Automotive Past* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 98-133.

emancipation from an unhappy marriage and controlling husband. For Katherine's denunciation of LA at the beginning of the novel is tempered by her eventual acclimatisation to the city and self-reinvention, while Paul's fantasies of love affairs with starlets and publications in eminent journals are quashed following a series of disasters involving material waste of different forms. He thus leaves the city and returns back East to teach—in a brilliant intertextual sleight of hand—at Convers College, the setting of *Love and Friendship*, while Katherine remains in the city that “made” her. According to Davis, “The ultimate world-historical significance—and oddity—of Los Angeles is that it has come to play the double role of utopia *and* dystopia for advanced capitalism.”<sup>39</sup> In Lurie, that double role is played out through the characters' shifting understanding of the city, its by-products, and its surrounding wastelands, which she shows to be inherently gender-dependent.

The unravelling of Paul's idealized vision of LA is already foreshadowed in one of the opening scenes, in which the reader is informed of Nutting Research's approach to its own output:

The security system for pieces of paper at Nutting extended from birth to death [...] When [Paul] wished to dispose of any classified piece of paper he had to [...] place it in the special Classified Trash container [...] Ordinary trash from the waste-baskets was collected by a city garbage truck; classified trash was ceremonially burnt once a week (NC 18).

The logic governing this whole process is that while the documents being destroyed are no longer of any value to the corporation, they would be of great value to a business competitor, or to anyone (journalists, foreign governments) intent on finding out about its activities. In that sense, their disposal is merely an extension of the profit-motive. As I have noted elsewhere, waste under capitalism becomes important—and warrants discussion—only when it can be made profitable, threatens productivity, or (as in this case) threatens to profit someone *else*.<sup>40</sup> Nutting's disposal system is thus but a corporate version of a scorched earth policy, premised on the paradox that the stuff in question is simultaneously valuable (to a competitor) and not valuable (to the company that produced it). The waste in question is likewise entirely at odds with the domestic junk with which the housewives in *Love and Friendship* contend, forming part of a broader discussion of national security rather than marital harmony or social propriety. Lurie in fact devotes several—highly amusing—pages to explaining the disposal process's shortcomings, including Paul's colleague Frank Skinner's panic when a “half-charred piece of paper” escapes the incinerator and blows over the fence

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<sup>39</sup> Davis, *City of Quartz*, 18.

<sup>40</sup> Dini, *Consumerism, Waste, and Re-use...*, 6; 24-24.

on the perimeter of the corporation's land (NC 17). While apparently worthless, this "disreputable object" poses a distinct threat both to Skinner's continued employment and to the very continuing of the corporation's operations: according to the company rule book, it "constitut[es] evidence of an unauthorized [...] removal of classified documents" (NC 17). In this way, the fragment is very powerful indeed—a point Lurie underscores by replicating both its contents and the typewriter font in which the text is written:

**Learning period in which practice signals an  
adjustment of the output is accomplished since  
it improves in efficiency, that is, in freedom of  
hence varies with each particular realization (NC 17).**

Paradoxically, the indecipherability of the text contained in this fragment renders the object innocuous, since the threat it originally posed stemmed from its capacity to disclose classified information. And yet within the context of corporate bureaucracy, what matters is that the waste paper (regardless of its contents) has exceeded its boundaries. The threat of information leakage is superseded by the remnant's indication of the fallibility of the company's security protocol.

The novel links Nutting's approach to its own excretions to its broader corporate ethos, most notably in Paul's recognition that the company's ineffectuality makes its involvement in the weapons industry harmless: "the purpose of this whole economy is to expend as much time, money and material as possible without creating anything useful" (NC 111). Nutting does no harm, because (as its very name suggests) it does *nothing*. The ultimate irony is that Paul's own work falls under this same remit: "it was the expensive public manufacture of nothing: the vaguely deliberate consumption of time, energy, intelligence, knowledge, and money, with no result—no product" (NC 159). The disappearance of all three copies of his historical study suggests that he himself is no different from the company's disposal mechanism (NC 160). Historiography here is merely propaganda for the military-industrial complex, the historian an extension of the city's entertainment industry. As Judie Newman notes, "Paul's history turns out to be 'Nutting' in every sense."<sup>41</sup>

Taken together, Nutting's paranoid stewardship of its excretions and Paul's realisation that his own work is considered trash, serve as a broader comment about both LA's economic base and the city's attitude to the past—but because they are voiced by a character so intensely dislikeable, they also appear as a satisfying rebuttal against male entitlement, which complicates a straightforwardly Marxist reading of the text. Such an impression is borne out

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<sup>41</sup> Newman, *Alison Lurie*, 48.

by waste's role, in a series of subsequent scenes, in scuppering Paul's California dreaming and eventually confronting him with the fact that in this utopia, he is redundant. The first of these is an arresting description of Paul's *flânerie*, in the company of his beatnik lover Ceci, through the slums of Venice:

The ruins of [Venice's] earlier glory—for at the turn of the century it had been a fashionable seaside resort—still stood: the long arcades, the graceful balconies [...] But it was all in the last stages of desecration [...] There were more people about here, but all of them, like the buildings, seemed damaged and soiled. [...] Bums and cripples and criminals, the dregs of the city (even of the continent) washed up on Venice Beach as if by the landlocked tide (*NC* 86).

Initially, the passage recalls Walter Benjamin's meditations, in *The Arcades Project*, on the socio-historical significance of the Paris Arcades, which were rendered obsolete by the end of the nineteenth century by the city's first department stores.<sup>42</sup> For Benjamin, the Arcades were perfect symbols of the speed with which capitalism shrugs off the old to make way for the new. Paul is no Benjamin, however—for his disgust is aimed not at the system that has rendered Venice obsolete and turned it into a home for society's unwanted, but rather at the unwanted themselves, who sully his idealized vision of the city and insult his aesthetic sensibilities.

Waste plays a more personal role in disrupting Paul's hope for fulfilment in LA at two subsequent points in the novel. In the first of these, he takes Ceci on a drive to the countryside only to realize that it has been replaced by a "waste ground bright with real estate signs" advertising luxury developments that have yet to be built. Paul's pastoral vision of lovemaking on a grassy slope is thus quashed: "Somehow they had got out of *Walden* into 'The Waste Land'" (*NC* 165). Lurie expands on this conceit in a later scene in which the Hollywood home of Glory, a starlet for whom Katherine works as an assistant, is flooded due to a bathroom tap being left on. Paul and Glory wade through the mansion's flooded rooms, pushing away disintegrating copies of *Vogue* magazine and floating furniture, before inevitably having sex in the waterlogged bathroom (*NC* 242-244). At a basic level, the scene serves as the novel's very own "Death by Water," a watery *petite mort* to counter the barren landscapes throughout the rest of the text. But more importantly, the disappointing nature of this brief encounter offers a corrective to Paul's original fantasy of LA as akin to the sixteenth

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<sup>42</sup> Judie Newman provides an incisive analysis of the strains of Adorno and Benjamin in *The Nowhere City* in "Walter Benjamin Goes to Hollywood" in *Alison Lurie: A Critical Study*, 47-76. For a concise history of the Arcades, see Rachel Bowlby, *Carried Away: The Invention of Modern Shopping* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), esp. 77-78.

century, his period of specialism, where “he might find other paraphernalia of courtly love: the impenetrable castles [...] the worship from afar of the beloved movie starlet” (NC 8). Sex in the flooded bathroom of a third-rate movie starlet’s mansion undermines Paul’s vision of impenetrable castles and courtly love, just as the uncomfortable love-making among empty cans and dried twigs, and the disposability of his historical study, undermined his dreams of a countryside dalliance and academic legacy. Waste and disorder once more expose the fallibility of “California dreaming” as well as revealing the dreamer’s own self-delusion.

This feminist reading of the “nothing city” and the remnants left behind in its continual redevelopment is borne out by Katherine’s narrative trajectory. Having moved to LA with no plans, Katherine has little to lose beyond the symptoms of a perennial psychosomatic sinusitis, and a garage full of antique furniture once owned by her parents but that doesn’t fit in with the California aesthetic (NC 130). While in Paul’s case waste is a corrective to fantasy, in Katherine’s it stands for an obstructive, and inherently patriarchal, past: her re-invention is thus framed as a process of leaving matter behind. Sinuses drained of mucus, old clothes discarded, she now answers to the new name of “Kay.” LA’s a-historicity, its willing subjection to the tyranny of consumerism, and its ceaseless renovation and redevelopment are posited as potentially liberating in this instance, offering the opportunity for female emancipation. This is conveyed beautifully—and comically—in the novel’s last pages, when Paul returns to LA to retrieve Katherine and discovers that not only has she “disappeared” and been replaced with someone he doesn’t recognize: the other houses on his street have vanished as well to give way to the construction of a new freeway. While the sight of the dirt mounds leads Paul to imagine the end of civilization (NC 274), “Kay” is unconcerned, merely interpreting the neighbourhood’s razing as reason to find a new apartment. Likewise, while Paul assumes that by taking Katherine’s furniture back East he will eventually lure his wife home, “Kay” is relieved to have gotten rid of both husband and unwanted objects. To the view of LA as an Eliot-esque heap of broken images—as exemplified by the poor and dispossessed who inhabit the dirty margins of John Fante’s LA in *Ask the Dust* (1939),<sup>43</sup> the junked cars and cryptic W.A.S.T.E post boxes in Pynchon’s *Crying of Lot 49* (1965),<sup>44</sup> or the members of the Chicano Moratorium in Oscar Zeta Acosta’s *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (1973),<sup>45</sup> who are depicted as embodying all that corporate LA wishes to forget<sup>46</sup>—Lurie posits the city as a regenerative, and potentially emancipatory, space.

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<sup>43</sup> John Fante, *Ask the Dust* (London: Canongate, 1980 [1939]). See esp. 46-47.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *Crying of Lot 49* (London: Vintage, 2000 [1965]), 102; 34.

<sup>45</sup> Oscar Zeta Acosta, *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (New York: Vintage, 1989 [1973]), 198-213.

<sup>46</sup> See Raymund A. Paredes’s reading of *The Cockroach People* as establishing a “lin[k] between the unsavoriness of LA and its long-standing abuse of its Mexican-American population”: “Los Angeles from the Barrio: Oscar Zeta Acosta’s *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*” in *Los Angeles in Fiction: A collection of Essays*, ed. David Fine (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 251.

The novel's ending, then, does not gesture so much to a shoring up of remnants than a return to the past for Paul, and a complete disposal of the past for Katherine. And while Katherine's subscription to Hollywood ideals of beauty could be seen as limiting this emancipation, such incompleteness reflects the fledgling freedoms of women themselves in this period. Katherine's trajectory suggests that the extreme form of American capitalism embodied in late 1950s/early 1960s LA and assimilation of the beauty myth is a more liberating alternative to the "nothing" available to a faculty wife at an all-male college. Whether this is empirically true or not is a moot point. Feminist critics tend to view capitalism as particularly bad for women,<sup>47</sup> while scholars such as Ann Cudd take the view that (controlled) capitalism promotes social innovation, and in particular "the destruction of harmful, patriarchal traditions"<sup>48</sup>—but for our purposes, what is significant is Lurie's deployment of the latter view to complicate the anti-LA genre and to ultimately subvert the reader's assumptions about where cultural value lies. Despite focusing relentlessly on the ruins of tradition that LA has left in its wake—or more accurately, mixed together with no thought to order or sequence—Lurie's novel posits the city itself as an important starting point for the negotiation of a new gender politics. In this context, the fragments of culture and tradition "Kay" has left behind are not that dissimilar from the mess that *Love and Friendship*'s Emmy chooses to stop cleaning up, for they are as obstructive to her emancipation as an overflowing bin or sink full of dirty dishes.

#### 4. "[C]onfused, disintegrating in time and space"<sup>49</sup>: *The War Between the Tates*

*The War Between the Tates* returns the reader to the world of East Coast academia and to the fictional college town of Corinth, in upstate New York—believed to be based on Ithaca, home to Cornell, where Lurie and her husband both taught for many years.<sup>50</sup> The novel follows the intertwined stories of housewife Erica Tate and her husband Brian, a history professor busy writing a book on American foreign policy in the Cold War and sleeping with a postgraduate student named Wendy. The Tates' marriage is convulsed first by Erica's discovery of the love affair and of Wendy's pregnancy, and later by Erica's own love affair, after the couple separates, with the owner of a local Zen bookstore, and Brian's unwitting involvement in defending the history department against allegations of sexism. As in Lurie's

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<sup>47</sup> See in particular Rokhsana Bahramitash, *Liberation from Liberalization* (London: Zed Books, 2005) and J.K. Gibson-Graham, *The End Of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique Of Political Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

<sup>48</sup> Ann E. Cudd, "Is Capitalism Good for Women?" *Journal of Business Ethics* 127.4 (April 2015): 761-770. Citation on 762 and 766.

<sup>49</sup> Alison Lurie, *The War Between the Tates* (London: Abacus, 1989 [1974]), 310. Hereafter references to this novel will be in the form of parentheses in the text and using the abbreviation *WBTT* followed by the page number.

<sup>50</sup> Newman, *Alison Lurie*, 24.

earlier fiction, the intricacy of this plot is tongue-in-cheek, parodying the ubiquitous love triangles found in popular fiction. And as the title itself indicates, each of these narrative strands is framed in the rhetoric of warfare, serving to reflect, more broadly, on the national crisis of identity that accompanied the social upheavals of the 1960s. Set in 1969, at the peak of the US's involvement in Vietnam, *The War Between the Tates* is, above all, a novel about dislocation—exemplified, for Brian, by his students' questioning of academic authority, embrace of Zen, and demands for gender equality; for Erica, by the redevelopment of the landscape surrounding their home into luxury apartment blocks, her own physical ageing, and her social irrelevance as an unattached woman; and for both, by the Vietnam War and their children's seemingly overnight transformation into teenage monsters. Various (darkly comical) reflections upon the parallels between the Tates' family tensions and Vietnam (*WBTT* 77-79) heighten the connection between micro and macro, individual narrative and national, rendering this story of marital crisis an allegory, as well, for American fallibility. Like the dirt in *Love and Friendship*, garbage in *The War Between the Tates* reflects the sully of the family unit via the intrusion of unwanted foreign matter (in this case, Wendy and her unborn child). But it also serves as a metaphor for geopolitical tensions and ecological anxiety. As Brian wryly recognizes: "The war in South-East Asia is escalating, and Jones Creek is polluted with detergent. At home too everything is falling apart" (*WBTT* 77). Waste here is at once matter out of place *and* matter out of time: it is a radical disruptor of patriarchal traditions, as well as material evidence of both geophysical and socio-political transformation.

That waste might have a feminist dimension is made explicit in a scene following Erica's discovery that the woman with whom Brian is sleeping is physically unattractive. As she walks home, Erica looks with disgust upon the litter proliferating around the college's fraternity houses:

In front of one fraternity a maroon over-stuffed chair, badly spotted, lies on its side vomiting kapok—apparently a casualty of last night's brawl. Garbage, Erica thinks. Litter, pollution, filth [...] [S]he had believed the filth was gone [...] She had thought that by casually and lovelessly screwing a pretty girl Brian had polluted and dishonoured their marriage as much as he possibly could. But she was wrong. Now he has gone further in dishonour—he is screwing an ugly girl. He has become unclean, revolting—like that can there, tipped over and spewing out beer bottles and old bones. Litter and lies (*WBTT* 74).



From the perspective of discard studies, and for readers familiar with 1960s and 70s literary depictions of waste, the passage is fascinating in the way it equates consumer effluvia not with capitalist excess or the fickleness of consumerism, but rather with *male* excess and patriarchy. In contrast to the descriptions of trash in the work of Lurie's male contemporaries—most notably, Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* (1959); Barthelme's *Snow White* (1967); DeLillo's *Americana* (1971), *Endzone* (1972), and *Great Jones Street* (1973); or Gaddis's *J R* (1975), not to mention the meticulous account of planned obsolescence in Vance Packard's *The Waste Makers* (1960)—Lurie's waste is not a reproach to either capitalism or bourgeois values, but rather to the inequities and contradictions of a patriarchal tradition. Where, for example, waste in *Great Jones Street* is part of a reproach to a marketplace that like a "living organism [...] sucks things in and spews them up,"<sup>51</sup> and waste in Barthelme's "The Rise of Capitalism" (1970) forms a means to parody both a consumerism gone awry and a Marxist rhetoric powerless to fight it,<sup>52</sup> in Lurie's text the messy by-products of a fraternity house's partying are presented as an embodiment of *male* excess and depravity. Likewise, the meaning Erica confers upon this garbage is entirely bound up with her husband's flouting of rules first set in place by patriarchy (in this case, that a husband's adultery is less insulting when it is with a woman more beautiful than his wife).

This feminist potential of waste is explored further in a later scene, in which Erica mistakenly gives Brian a bag of garbage instead of a packed lunch:

This Wednesday after his class Brian returned to the office accompanied by a radical graduate student named Davidoff who had proposed a dubious project for his seminar paper. While outlining his objections to this project Brian sat down at his desk, uncovered his container of coffee, and upended his paper bag. Instead of lunch, what fell out on to the blotter was a heap of coffee grounds, crushed eggshells, orange rinds, crusts of toast stained with jelly, and soggy Frosted Flakes (*WBTT* 81).

Unsurprisingly, while Brian is in equal measure appalled and disturbed, Erica finds the mistake hilarious. There is great satisfaction to be had from feeding garbage to her cheating husband—to make him eat the litter she equates with his betrayal. In broader terms, however, what stands out here is how waste's evasion from the housewife's "production line" of morning tasks has resulted in the disruption of her husband's work, which it is her job to facilitate. As Strasser notes, the influence of Fordism and Taylorism extended, from the 1920 onward, to the redefinition of housework as a process of satisfying (husband and children's)

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<sup>51</sup> DeLillo, *Great Jones Street* (London: Picador, 2011 [1973]), 28.

<sup>52</sup> Barthelme, "The Rise of Capitalism," *Sixty Stories* (New York: Penguin, 1981), 198-202.

needs quickly.<sup>53</sup> In this context, the rubbish bag Erica gives Brian exemplifies the “inconveniences, obstacles, or annoyances”<sup>54</sup> that the modern kitchen was intended to eliminate: it scuppers the smooth flow of productive work, and impedes the fulfilment of the two characters’ respective roles (homemaker and worker). Lurie’s careful description of Erica’s morning routine adds a pointed specificity to this radical act:

[Every Wednesday] Erica packs [Brian’s] lunch [...] in a brown paper bag. At the same time she also packs lunchboxes for the children, washes all the breakfast dishes, sweeps the kitchen, and takes out the trash—the bottles and papers and cans to one container, the garbage, in a paper bag, to another (WBTT 81).

As a wealth of feminist critics writing in the 1950s and 1960s argued, the fact that housework is not considered “work,” and is in fact even considered a luxury, is in itself exploitative.<sup>55</sup> By failing at this task, Erica effectively demonstrates her indispensability. Lurie’s feminist waste disrupts and *inconveniences* the (male) hegemonic order, and participates in retaliating against the housewife’s exploitation. The reference to Brian’s “radical” graduate student lends the scene further irony: for his wife’s actions unwittingly have an effect far more tangible than a seminar essay espousing leftist theory or new approaches to historiography.

Lurie’s text, moreover, reveals an interesting paradox. If society expects women to clean up mess and judges them negatively when they don’t, liberation might equally come from flouting one’s cleaning duties entirely and dwelling *in* mess, or taking them to the extreme and expelling both mess and its main producer: the husband who doesn’t tidy up after himself and who pollutes the marriage through infidelity. In the latter case, this results in being an ideal housewife to one’s *self*. Where Emmy in *Love and Friendship* and Erica’s friend Danielle opt for the former tactic, Erica opts for the latter.<sup>56</sup> In keeping with the philosophy espoused in *South Pacific* (1949), “I’m gonna wash that man/right out of my hair,”<sup>57</sup> she spends the week following Brian’s expulsion from the house euphorically erasing all traces of his previous presence: “Cleaning out his chest of drawers, she felt no nostalgia—only a faint

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<sup>53</sup> Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (New York: Holt, 1999), 183.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>55</sup> See, in particular, de Beauvoir’s analysis of housework in *The Second Sex* (270-274); Oakley’s description of the central contradiction inherent to housewifery: “housework is work, housework is not work,” 2; 5; 77; 241; and Betty Friedan’s questioning of the toll of housework on women’s mental health—and cultural ramifications of the “hardening” of the housewife mystique—in *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Penguin, 2010 [1963]), 15 and 34.

<sup>56</sup> While an in-depth discussion of this is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth noting that in Lurie’s much later novel, *Foreign Affairs* (1985), dwelling in mess has anything but an emancipatory effect, in fact leading to the psychological breakdown of Rosemary Radley.

<sup>57</sup> Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, “I’m Gonna Wash That Man Right Outa My Hair” (1949) in *South Pacific*. Perf. Mitzi Gaynor, *South Pacific* 1958. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox.

distaste for all those identical rolled dark-brown orlon socks clustered together like horse-droppings” (*WBTT* 154).

By contrast, Brian’s perception of the house, when he returns to pick up some items, suggests obvious anxieties about the potential disintegration of the home in his absence, as well as about his own status as an expelled entity. Brian’s perception is all the more compelling in that it reflects his obsession with George Kennan’s theory of containment (that the US should focus on containing Soviet expansionism rather than appease or engage in overt war with the Soviet Union<sup>58</sup>). Lurie humorously depicts Brian applying Kennan’s ideas, throughout the novel, to inter-departmental disputes, his marriage, and the women’s rights protests on campus, but perhaps most notably in the neighbourhood dogs’ nightly invasion of the family’s rubbish bins (*WBTT* 46). To deal with this latter issue of containment, Brian covers the bins with rocks every evening (*WBTT* 46; 55). However, no one takes up this task after Erica kicks him out: thus when he comes by he notes with horror the yard’s “disreputable” appearance and the “offensive” garbage littering the driveway: “The dogs of Glenview Heights have been at their trash again, and no one has done anything about it” (*WBTT* 147). The house’s interior has in turn devolved into a domestic wasteland-qua-battlefield in which “rock music soak[s] down from above,” “a box leaking crackers, a carton of milk souring, smeary jars of peanut butter and jam” litter the kitchen table (*WBTT* 147), and the Tates’ daughter, Matilda, reads “childish trash” that Brian warns will “rot” her mind (*WBTT* 151). Crucially, Brian perceives this chaos as a personal insult. Like his children, his undergraduate students, the campus feminists, and his lover Wendy’s resistance to his pleas to have an abortion, this mess is an affront to his authority and evidence of failed containment. Indeed, both the mess and the disquiet it evinces in the head of the family exemplify what Alan Nadel has since described, in his seminal historical study, *Containment Culture* (1995), as the “breakdown in American narratives of containment,” which he argues gave rise to American postmodernism—a failure based, in part, on “the dubious authority upon which [rules-governed authority] relied.”<sup>59</sup> For Nadel, Kennan’s theory of containment permeated American culture across the board, manifesting itself in McCarthyism, the enforcement of traditional gender roles, heteronormativity, and racism, all of which sought to “maintain [the] impossible boundary between Same and Other.”<sup>60</sup> While Lurie is not, of course, expressing an incipient postmodernism—a term that did not come into use until over a decade later—one can certainly argue that the waste Brian surveys and that appears to have effectively taken his place embodies both the breakdown of containment culture and the anxieties it elicited in

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<sup>58</sup> Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia and the Cold War: 1945-2006* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2008), 95; 358.

<sup>59</sup> Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 2 and 205.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

members of the dominant order.<sup>61</sup> The scene's humorous tone—which is starkly at odds with Erica's mournful contemplations of litter or of her children's disinterest in her—in turn lends it a gleefully radical, even anarchic, quality.

While the waste matter in *The War Between the Tates* serves an important feminist function, disrupting male expectations on a number of levels, it also expresses anxieties that affect *both* genders equally: their own obsolescence in the face of time's passage and socio-political change. Lurie renders this explicit in Brian's sardonic realisation that he is “not living in present-day America, but in another country or city-state [...] which can for convenience's sake be called ‘University’ populated by youth aged 18 to 22” (*WBTT* 29). More movingly, however, it is manifest in Erica's disconsolate sense of her own irrelevance. When she asks her daughter Matilda to clean her room, Matilda destroys all of her old toys: Erica is left to carry “what [is] beyond repair out to the trashcan” (*WBTT* 190). Among the few salvageable toys is an “elegant Colonial” dollhouse that “looks now as if it had been hit by a hurricane” (*WBTT* 190), which not-so-subtly reflects the dissolution of the family unit—as evident in Erica's reflection that the Tate house itself is a “broken home now [...] as if some stupid teenage giant walking over the world had picked it up and then losing interest flung it aside” (*WBTT* 191). That the dollhouse relic is a shattered Colonial mansion is also significant. Like the vandalising of the building site in *Love and Friendship*, the ceaseless razing and redevelopment of land in *The Nowhere City*, and Erica's discomfort at the new developments being built in her neighbourhood, the destruction of the dollhouse serves as an allegory for upheaval. And where a straightforwardly feminist reading might see its decimation as emancipating, the text in fact frames it as a source of great anxiety: a sign, for Erica, that her children no longer need her. Such sympathy is once more evinced in her expostulation, a few scenes later:

Nineteen sixty-nine—it doesn't sound right, it's a year I don't belong in [...] Reality was when the children were small and before the housing development. [...] You see, we know all the rules for that world [...] what kind of sandwiches to make for each lunchbox, everything [...] Everything's changed, and I'm too tired to learn the new rules. I don't care about nineteen sixty-nine at all. I don't care about rock festivals or black power or student revolutions or going to the moon. I feel like an exhausted time traveller (*WBTT* 197).

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<sup>61</sup> Judie Newman provides an excellent analysis of Kennan's broader views, including his ideas about child-rearing, campus politics, and American exceptionalism, in her chapter on *The War Between the Tates* in *Alison Lurie: A Critical Study*, which draws on a range of Kennan's published works and speeches. See pp. 110-126.

This sense of defeat differs starkly from the mobilising efforts of the women's rights activists who seek, throughout the novel, to evince change in the campus's treatment of women, finally resorting to holding one of Brian's colleagues hostage. In direct contrast to these women, Erica assumes herself to be redundant: "[t]here are already too many extra women in Corinth; spinsters, widows, ex-wives. One cannot have them all at once; they must take turns, and be grateful" (*WBTT* 204). This surplus status is made further apparent in Erica's description of herself as "used goods": "If you know of someone who wants your old clothes, your day-old bread, it is wrong to keep them selfishly in the cupboard" (*WBTT* 243). Just as she used to save stale bread to feed the birds, she now waits for a male friend who is in love with her "to crowd, to grab" (*WBTT* 243).

This self-objectification, together with Erica's friend Danielle's eventual acceptance of marriage from a man who has raped her, counters any optimism the reader might feel in the face of Corinth's shifting politics: the rights being earned in this novel are exclusive to a younger generation of women to whom Erica and Danielle feel no real allegiance. By focussing on the losses and compromises of this middle-aged "left-over housewife and ill-paid assistant" (*WBTT* 266) and her friend and companion in disappointment, Lurie complicates utopian perceptions of the late 1960s as emancipating. The Tates' eventual reconciliation at the end of the novel (like that of Emmy and Holman in *Love and Friendship*), and Brian's return home, heightens this. As in Lurie's previous novels, the feminist vision the text puts forward is progressive precisely in its honest rendition of this uncomfortable interstitial stage in the history women's liberation, its faithful representation of "things as they are" rather than "things as they should be," and of change as perceived by those living through it—including, in this case, the members of the conservative "Happy American Homemakers," who send love letters to Brian for "taking a stand" against feminism (*WBTT* 264). Building on Raymond Williams' distinction between the "dominant," "residual," and "emergent" strains to be found within any process of historical change<sup>62</sup>—that is, between the hegemonic order, those elements that have "been effectively formed in the past" but continue to influence the present,<sup>63</sup> and the "new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships" that are "continually being created"<sup>64</sup>—we might state that Lurie's fiction in this period explores an emergent feminism, not only through its recognition of the politics of cleaning, but also in its recognition that on a metaphorical level, waste is

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<sup>62</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989 [1977]), 120-127.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

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both a residue of the past and a component in constructing the future. The “surplus” ex-wives in *The War Between the Tates*, like the “dirty” Emmy, are vital participants in an early stage of change.

*Love and Friendship*, *The Nowhere City* and *The War Between the Tates* provide an incisive account of the transformation of US gender relations over the course of the 1950s and 1960s through the decades’ effluvia. The texts discussed here approach dirt, waste and disorder from a range of perspectives that diverge in important ways from the waste narratives of Lurie’s male contemporaries. In each of these texts, Lurie shows waste and dirt to be feminist issues, their codification frequently helping to justify gender (and class) inequality, but their representation helping to lay them bare.

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